

**STATEMENT OF
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CHIEF
Of the
FOREST SERVICE
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Before the
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH
And the
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, RECREATION, AND PUBLIC LANDS

COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

July 13, 2005

CONCERNING

Motorized Recreational Use of Federal Lands

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittees:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on the Forest Service's role in providing motorized outdoor recreation opportunities on federal lands.

Background

The USDA Forest Service manages 155 national forests and 20 national grasslands, in 42 States and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. By law, these lands are managed under multiple use and sustained yield principles. In this context, the Forest Service oversees a vast, complex array of natural resources and opportunities. One of the key opportunities provided on National Forest System lands is outdoor recreation. Today, 211 million visitors enjoy their national forests and grasslands each year, participating in a wide range of motorized and non-motorized recreation activities, including hiking, horseback riding, bicycling, snowmobiling, and riding off-highway vehicles.

This year the Forest Service celebrates a century of service. We've been reflecting in our centennial year on our history and are preparing for the challenges ahead. In 1905, recreational

use on most national forests was relatively light. User impacts and conflicts focused on other issues such as grazing, settlement, fire, and timber. Today, recreation is an ever growing use of National Forest System lands. National forest recreation provides healthy opportunities to enjoy the outdoors, connects people to their federal land, and represents a significant contribution to the economy of many rural areas.

Motorized recreation has contributed to that boom. Between 11 and 12 million off-highway vehicle (OHV) riders visit National Forest System lands each year. Snowmobilers, boaters, and visitors driving forest roads for pleasure add to this total. About half of the OHV riders travel more than 50 miles to reach the national forest, and about a third of them indicate they have no other place to ride.

Motorized recreation and OHVs are legitimate uses of National Forest System lands – in the right places and when operated responsibly. We have a tremendous obligation and a great opportunity to serve these users and, through them, our local communities and economies. We see it as an important part of our mission.

Travel Management Program

Nationally, the Forest Service manages approximately 300,000 miles of National Forest System roads open to motor vehicle use, and about 133,000 miles of National Forest System trails. About 26 percent of these trails (35,000 miles) are open to motor vehicle use. This transportation system ranges from paved roads designed for passenger cars to single-track trails used by dirt bikes. Many roads designed for high-clearance vehicles (such as log trucks and sport utility vehicles) also allow use by all terrain vehicles (ATVs) and other off-highway vehicles not normally found on city streets. Almost all National Forest System trails serve non-motorized users, including hikers, bicyclists, and equestrians, alone or in combination with motorized users. National Forest System roads often accept non-motorized use as well.

Where appropriate the Forest Service provides specialized trail opportunities for designated off-route riding at specific managed sites.

An example of an off-route riding area is the Oregon Dunes National Recreation Area. From Florence to Coos Bay, the Oregon Dunes extends for 40 miles along the Oregon Coast. These are the largest expanse of coastal sand dunes in North America and they hold numerous opportunities for adventure and solitude.

The Dunes attract more than 350,000 ATV riders annually who come to enjoy riding across these expansive tracks of sand. Three main OHV riding areas have been set aside to provide riders with a variety of experiences. There are sand roads and designated riding areas, small areas with the highest and most dramatic dunes in the Umpqua Riding area, and large areas with varied riding opportunities.

An example of a designated system is the Paiute ATV Trail, located primarily on the Fishlake National Forest in Utah, offering outstanding opportunities for motorized recreation. The Paiute ATV trail is a 250-mile looped trail spanning three mountain ranges, passing through rugged canyons and deserts. The trail is intended for families and individuals to enjoy scenic beauty, wildlife viewing and other recreational opportunities. Most of the trail is located on the Fishlake National Forest, while lower elevation portions are on the lands administered by the Richfield District of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Combined with its numerous side trips, the Paiute Trail offers over 650 miles of riding opportunity.

The Paiute ATV trail system was developed as a joint venture which began in 1989 and has since grown to involve more than 40 public and private entities. The Trail is administered by the Fishlake National Forest, the Sevier River Resource Area of the BLM, and the Utah Division of Parks and Recreation, with oversight by a cross-disciplinary coalition called the Paiute ATV Trail Committee.

National forests also include public roads managed by state, county, and local governments. These roads serve local communities closely connected to the lands we manage. State and county roads also provide access to National Forest System lands, and we must continue to work in cooperation with states and counties to manage our multi-jurisdictional transportation system. In addition, other federal, state, and private lands provide specialized OHV riding opportunities,

such as California's State Vehicular Recreation Areas and West Virginia's Hatfield-McCoy Trail System.

Increasing Demand

In 1972, when President Nixon signed Executive Order 11644 directing federal agencies to manage off-road vehicles, an estimated 5 million Americans participated in OHV recreation. Preliminary figures in 2004 indicate that 51 million users participated last year, a ten fold increase in just 32 years. Sales of new ATVs alone jumped from 278,000 in 1995 to 799,000 in 2004. Today, vehicles created for specialized off-highway uses are marketed and sold as family cars. Today's vehicles are also more powerful and more capable of off-highway travel than those of a decade ago.

These advances expand opportunities for Americans to enjoy Federal land. However, the magnitude and intensity of motor vehicle use have increased to the point that the intent of E.O. 11644 cannot be met under current regulations while still allowing unrestricted cross-country travel. Soil erosion, water quality, and wildlife habitat are affected. Some national forest visitors report that their ability to enjoy quiet recreational experiences is affected by visitors using motor vehicles. A designated and managed system of roads, trails, and areas for motor vehicle use is needed.

Current policy, as administered across the National Forest System, varies from state to state and national forest to national forest. Sometimes one national forest restricts motor vehicles to roads and trails, while an adjoining national forest allows unrestricted cross-country travel. One state may prohibit ATVs on public roads, while an adjoining state generally allows such use. Revised regulations are needed to provide a consistent national framework that will clarify motor vehicle use within the National Forest System, but will allow local decisions about designations of roads, trails, areas for motor vehicle use.

In 2003, I identified the effects of unmanaged recreation, including OHV use, as one of four key threats affecting national forests and grasslands. This is no longer a matter of a few user conflicts or a few user-created trails here and there. We estimate that we have more than 14,000 miles of user-created trails on the national forests and grasslands. Some of these are well-located and

would make good additions to our trail system. Others run through wetlands, riparian areas, and stream channels. Damage to water quality, erosion, loss of wildlife habitat, and introduction of invasive species jeopardize the health of the land, the sustainability of the use, and the opportunities people come to the national forests to enjoy. That's why we have to change the way we manage OHV use on the national forests. OHV use has reached a critical mass. If we want all the benefits from OHV use to continue, we have to make sure it is conducted responsibly and sustainably. And that means better management.

Proposed Regulations

In July, 2004, the Forest Service published new proposed regulations on travel management, laying the foundation for a sustainable system of designated roads, trails, and areas for motor vehicle use. The proposed rule would provide a national framework for local decisions about motorized recreation. Under the proposed rule:

- Each national forest would designate those roads, trails, and areas open to motor vehicle use, by class of vehicle and if appropriate, by time of year;
- The public would play a central role in the designation process;
- Local managers would coordinate with appropriate federal, state, county and other local governments and tribal governments in the designation process;
- Designations would apply only to National Forest System roads and National Forest System trails and areas on National Forest System lands;
- After designation is complete, the rule would prohibit use inconsistent with those designations;
- Use of aircraft, watercraft, and emergency and law enforcement vehicles and use authorized under permit or other written authorization would be exempted; and
- The rule would retain current authorities for snowmobiles.

We received over 81,000 comments on the proposed rule, from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and two international U.S. Armed Forces bases. These comments reflect the importance of this issue to many Americans. They also reflect broad support, from

motorized and non-motorized users, environmental groups, and state and local governments, for the concept of a designated route system.

We are currently responding to those comments and preparing a final rule, which we expect to publish before the end of the year.

Collaboration

To sustain opportunities for motorized recreation, we will need to sustain and develop partnerships particularly with users groups. Fortunately, I see a lot of common ground, because most OHV users don't come just to ride. They come to national forests and grasslands for the same things other people do. More than half say they come to experience nature, and more than 40 percent come to see wildlife. OHV riders are often willing to help, and we have numerous examples of volunteers going out on their OHVs to clean up trash, fix trails, repair damaged meadows, and teach new riders safe and responsible practices.

Today, we would be unable to maintain much of our trail system without support from our volunteers and partners. National organizations such as the National Off-Highway Vehicle Conservation Council and Tread Lightly! sponsor education programs for riders, including children. Local groups of riders adopt and maintain trails. Manufacturers sponsor new trail construction. Rider groups including the Blue Ribbon Coalition have taken the lead on noise testing. These partnerships give me great hope. We can and will take on our challenges together, and continue to provide motorized recreation opportunities and healthy lands for future generations.

Drafting new travel management regulations is critical. However, working collaboratively with user groups, local communities, and the public to revise (where needed) and implement our travel management plans is critical to our overall success. I recently attended an OHV Collaboration Summit in San Diego, bringing together state, federal, and local agencies, user groups, manufacturers, and environmental groups to discuss collaborative planning. It was rewarding to see groups with different opinions and issues sharing information, learning from each other, and working together to find common ground on complex problems. We need that spirit of collaboration from all interests to be successful over the long term. The Forest Service

will continue to foster and actively participate in these collaborative processes for travel management planning, as I truly believe it is the best way to work together to craft lasting solutions for healthy ecosystems and strong communities.

Summary

Americans cherish the national forests and grasslands for the values they provide: opportunities for healthy recreation and exercise, natural scenic beauty, important natural resources, protection of rare species, wilderness, a connection with their history, and opportunities for unparalleled outdoor adventure. The Forest Service must strike an appropriate balance in managing all types of recreational activities. A designated system for motor vehicle use, established with public involvement, will enhance public enjoyment of the national forests, while maintaining other important values and uses on National Forest System lands.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you or other members of the Subcommittees have.